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ABSTRACT

This article offers four explanations of why outcome-based education (OBE) has proven to be so controversial. First, OBE requires consideration of the central purposes of compulsory public education, on which there is sharp philosophical disagreement, and the outcome-defining process involves input from many groups with many different perspectives, including students, parents, educators, higher education institutions, employers, community leaders, taxpayers, and policymakers. Second, conflict has arisen between two kinds of OBE and between the interest groups allied with one version or the other. The original version of OBE confined itself fairly narrowly to academic achievement, while the other version (known as transformational OBE) encompasses not only academic knowledge and competence but also affective and attitudinal dimensions of learning. Third, OBE is not "just" about outcomes, but involves a relationship between outcomes and inputs, which are often questions of cost. Fourth, OBE has become a contest for control over the "culture" of education, emphasizing not the actual goals proposed for inclusion in OBE but who proposes them. The four explanations are designed to help construct a framework for understanding and engaging in the OBE debate. (JDD)

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Outcome-Based Education: Reframing the Debate

INTRODUCTION

Outcome-based education (or OBE) describes an approach to schooling that focuses on goals and results -- learning outcomes -- rather than on resources and expenditures (inputs). It involves defining what we expect all students to know and be able to do at various points in their education, and testing them to see if they have indeed acquired the expected knowledge and skills. OBE is typically contrasted with "input-based" or "resource-based" approaches to schooling that define (for example) how much money should be spent on each student, how many years of math a student should take by the end of high school, or how high teachers' salaries should go.

Over the past eight to ten years, OBE has been taken up by a broad range of opinion leaders and decisionmakers concerned about declining student achievement, frustrated by the slow pace of school reform, and intrigued by the standards-based education systems of some other nations. The appeal of OBE is easy enough to grasp. An education system based on defined learning outcomes and systematic assessment would offer the following advantages:

- students (and their parents) could be more confident that the education they receive will serve as a solid foundation for a lifetime of productive work and learning;
- employers would be able to rely on a high school diploma as a real indication that the graduate can perform multifaceted tasks on the job;
- teachers and school administrators could develop rational plans for reform, starting with clearly defined goals and working backward to develop strategies and policies to ensure that all students achieve those results;
- communities and taxpayers could hold educators accountable for results and establish rewards or sanctions for success or failure.

Directly or indirectly, this new emphasis on outcomes is reflected in many aspects of the current education policy agenda. It is evident in the rhetoric of Goals 2000, for example, as well as in the push to develop national math and science standards and in a variety of experiments with new assessment techniques. In May 1993, Pennsylvania became the first state officially to adopt outcome-based education; by the end of that year (according to the Education Commission of the States), twenty-five states had developed or implemented an outcome-based approach to education, and eleven others had made outcomes a part of the state accreditation or assessment process.

But for an idea that seems so clear-cut and logical, OBE has provoked surprisingly passionate debate and bitter contention in many of the states where it is being considered. Why is OBE such a charged and problematic

issue? Where is the potential for controversy in this apparently straightforward notion?

In the article that follows, we will look at several possible – and by no means mutually exclusive – answers to these questions. We offer four "explanations" of why outcome-based education has proven to be so controversial:

- *Explanation #1*: OBE is a complex public policy issue that only *looks* simple.
- *Explanation #2*: OBE is "a good idea gone wrong."
- *Explanation #3*: OBE is not (just) about outcomes.
- *Explanation #4*: OBE isn't really about outcomes at all.

Two of the explanations derive from published reports on OBE (one from the Council and the other from the Hudson Institute), while two are based on some general observations about education policy and education politics today. For educators, policymakers, and business leaders interested in seeing that outcome-based school reform fulfills its considerable potential, these four interpretations may help construct a framework for understanding and engaging in the OBE debate.

EXPLANATION #1: OBE IS A COMPLEX PUBLIC POLICY ISSUE THAT ONLY *LOOKS* SIMPLE

In *Student Learning Outcomes: One Road to School Reform* (published by the Council in 1994), Pennsylvania State University doctoral candidate Michael A. Nugent and Council vice president Diana W. Rigden review the process through which Pennsylvania came to adopt outcome-based education. In so doing, they also provide an explanation of the controversy that has grown up around OBE nationwide. One of the most striking features of their narrative is how unexpectedly strong the opposition to OBE proved to be in Pennsylvania, and how unprepared education policymakers were for the kind of resistance they ultimately faced. With hindsight, it's clear that most proponents of OBE in Pennsylvania underestimated the seriousness of the issues that would be raised by the effort to identify education outcomes; OBE "looked simpler" to some of its advocates than it actually was. As Nugent and Rigden's account illustrates, **embedded in the switch to outcome-based education is a challenging and unavoidable set of public policy questions**; no community should expect to engage OBE without also engaging some fundamental and contentious issues.

At first glance, OBE seems primarily to represent a shift of emphasis, from inputs to outcomes. But by so viewing it, we run the risk of assuming that "inputs" and "outcomes" are known quantities, and that the chief effort involved in changing to an outcome-based system is the effort of refocusing our attention, moving it from one side of the equation to the other. In reality, OBE

invites a *substantive* debate of considerable complexity, with important implications for nearly every constituency within the community. This is because basing education policy on outcomes requires that we ask ourselves what are the central purposes of compulsory public education in this country. As it happens, the nature of public education is an issue on which there is now especially sharp philosophical disagreement. But even if the philosophical debate were less heated, clarifying the purposes of schooling would still be a challenge, since we educate youngsters for so many different reasons: to equip them with basic skills and knowledge; to prepare them to take their place as adult members of the political, social, and cultural community; to enable them to be productive workers, etc.

If we frame OBE in terms of these fundamental issues, we can understand why the outcome-defining process in most states has been contentious. And if we remind ourselves of the broad and varied missions assigned to schools, we can understand why the outcome-defining process has so often produced lengthy lists of goals, sometimes vaguely worded, that mix the academic and the nonacademic, the measurable and the unmeasurable. (The Pennsylvania list included five common core goals intended to represent the broader purpose of schools -- such as teaching ethical judgment, adaptability to change, and individual self worth -- and ten academic goals that focused on the mastery of knowledge and skills in key subject areas.) Such lists may in some instances be too confusing and impractical to make good policy, and in almost all instances will require careful, time-consuming refinement. And because so many groups have an interest in how the goals of schooling are defined (students, parents, educators, higher education institutions, employers, community leaders, taxpayers, policymakers), the potential for legitimate criticism and disagreement is enormous. Extensive negotiation and painful compromise are virtual necessities under such circumstances.

Add to these inevitable complexities the fact that the members of some ideological groups (most prominently, at least for now, the Christian Right) have determined that many of the proposed outcomes embody values -- from the acceptance of diverse lifestyles to the importance of critical thinking -- that threaten their own beliefs, and you have a public policy issue certain to arouse heated debate and deep controversy. This kind of debate can easily escalate (as it did in Pennsylvania) to the point where it is no longer based on the actual text of proposed outcomes, but rather on exaggerations, assumptions, and the power of certain phrases (like "higher order thinking skills," "life styles," and "appreciating others") to act as "code words" for those in opposition to OBE.

This, then, is one explanation of why the course of outcome-based education reform so seldom runs smooth: Before you can shift to outcomes as a basis for education policy, you have to identify the purposes of education, and that is by no means a simple undertaking. As Nugent and Rigden's analysis implies, controversy will inevitably attend the effort to describe educational goals. But Nugent and Rigden's focus on the policymaking process also implies that such controversy is an opportunity for genuine debate as well, and if properly handled by policymakers, educators, and concerned business and community leaders, it can ultimately be productive of broad consensus and real school change.

EXPLANATION #2: OBE IS "A GOOD IDEA GONE WRONG"

In a briefing paper from the Hudson Institute entitled "Outcome-Based Education: Miracle Cure or Plague?" Bruno V. Manno (a senior fellow at the Institute) offers another explanation of the furor surrounding OBE. He contends that there are now two versions of outcome-based education in circulation and that these two versions conflict seriously and irreparably with each other. For Manno, the source of the controversy over OBE lies not in the nature of the outcome-defining endeavor itself (as Nugent and Rigden suggest), but in the very real **conflict that has arisen between two kinds of OBE and between the interest groups allied with one version or the other**.

The original version of outcome-based education reform, Manno writes, confined itself fairly narrowly to academic achievement, requiring students to demonstrate competence in key subject areas such as reading and writing, science, mathematics, history, geography (the list could be extended to cover foreign languages, the arts, and other subject areas deemed to be at the "core" of schooling). This was the kind of OBE members of the National Governor's Association had in mind in the late 1980s when they and then-President Bush drafted national education goals for the year 2000.

But the late 1980s, Manno indicates, also saw the resurrection of another approach to defining educational outcomes, based on the earlier work of William G. Spady at the High Success Network in Colorado. "Transformational outcome-based education," as this approach is called, encompasses not only academic knowledge and competence but also "the affective and attitudinal dimensions of learning" deemed critical for success in life. (The word "transformation" here refers to the role schools play in shaping the "whole child" and forming children into good citizens, family members, friends, consumers, producers, and lifelong learners.) It is the expanded, transformational approach to defining educational goals, Manno would say, that produces such desired outcomes as "self-esteem," the "ability to work cooperatively," and having an "understanding of diversity."

Manno argues that transformational OBE subverts the basic premises on which outcome-based education reform stakes its claim to public support -- that fundamental educational goals should be clearly defined and measurable, and that schools should be held accountable for students' achievement of those goals. The outcomes generated by transformational OBE, he asserts, are too "fuzzy," impossible to quantify or assess, and therefore useless as accountability measures. To the extent that many state OBE initiatives incorporated such affective and attitudinal goals, then, they were deservedly rejected by significant numbers of citizens.

Manno claims further that the academically oriented OBE originally embraced by state governors and policymakers was deliberately "highjacked" by the educators and education bureaucrats charged with developing lists of outcomes. The education bureaucrats, in Manno's scenario, used their influence over the list-making process to substitute "politically correct," transformational OBE for authentic, academically oriented OBE -- hoping thus to avoid the kind of accountability for results that academically oriented OBE threatened to impose on them.

So OBE is problematic and controversial not (as Nugent and Rigden imply) because it raises fundamental questions about the purposes of schooling -- questions which are inevitably value-laden -- but because some fundamental confusion has emerged about what OBE is. The first explanation treats the controversy as a necessary but manageable aspect of public policymaking when the issues are complex; the second explanation (Manno's) treats the controversy as unnecessary -- something that happened when "a good idea went wrong" or became obfuscated because of efforts to turn it aside from its original intent. Nugent and Rigden's explanation, in pointing to the inherent complexity of the outcome-defining process, allows for the possibility that even the most academic of educational goals embody affective values (by according cognitive/analytical or critical thinking skills priority over other kinds of intellectual skills, for example). Manno on the other hand posits two quite distinct kinds of educational goals, the academic and the affective, which policymakers and the public should be capable of keeping separate if they are determined to do so.

From a policymaking perspective, the "truth" may lie somewhere between these two formulations. In other words, one does not have to subscribe fully to Manno's "highjacking" scenario to appreciate its underlying usefulness as a reminder that the closer our list of educational goals veers toward the (less measurable) affective and attitudinal results of schooling, the farther it may take us from accountability -- which is after all central to the very notion of standards-based education. By the same token, one does not have to take Nugent and Rigden's emphasis on complexity so literally as to be discouraged from making some pragmatic distinctions between the affective and academic goals of schooling when it comes to specifying expectations and establishing procedures for measurement and assessment. (In Pennsylvania, for example, measurable outcomes were eventually developed only for the most clearly academic goals; the more affective "core" goals were retained in the OBE initiative but no specific outcomes were attached to them.)

EXPLANATION #3: OBE IS NOT (JUST) ABOUT OUTCOMES

A third possible explanation of why OBE is such a problematic issue combines features of the first two. It highlights another respect in which outcome-based education is more complex than it seems and at the same time describes another kind of scenario in which OBE runs the risk of becoming a "good idea gone wrong." It hinges on **the relationship between outcomes on the one hand and inputs (which are often questions of cost) on the other**, and the controversy thus injected into the debate.

We have suggested that OBE is more problematic than it looks at first glance because it raises real philosophical issues about the goals of public education. But there is a second sense in which OBE looks deceptively simple. In seeming to mark a clear shift from resources to results, OBE implies the existence of a sharp distinction between educational outcomes and inputs -- a misleadingly tidy division. Nugent and Rigden hint at the more complex reality when they note that the greatest challenges to outcome-based

education reform may arise in the implementation phase. They mention specifically certain financial challeges: "Outcome-based education reforms will require changes in curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment. These in turn will demand resources for staff development, data collection, leadership training, reporting, curriculum development, and so forth." That is, one can't go very far with outcomes before returning to inputs; the shift in emphasis from resources to results is neither so complete nor so permanent as some of the OBE rhetoric suggests.

Acknowledging this complication is not necessarily an argument for "spending more on schools." Theoretically, at least, a great deal could be accomplished through reallocation of existing resources to help all children reach higher standards; a number of today's most promising school reform initiatives have held themselves to such limits, and are showing some measure of success. But the resource challenges posed by setting high standards will be clear-cut and inescapable in many instances. To mention only one example, research indicates that disadvantaged children "lose" knowledge and skills over the summer, even if they end the previous school year on a par with more privileged students. No amount of extra effort during the school year, no clarification of goals or raising of expectations, no teaching to the right test can prevent or minimize that kind of loss, while some kind of supplemental instruction during the summer months could very well do so. When this kind of extra input is called for -- and when we can be reasonably sure it will produce better outcomes -- should we confine ourselves to reallocating existing resources? Ought we to rely on private funding from corporations and foundations for this kind of programming? Or do we need to invest additional public monies? If we are serious about requiring all students to perform at high levels, then we won't be able to avoid some of these hard choices.

In other words, outcomes cannot be defined without implications for inputs. The new orientation toward educational outcomes can, however, help us direct educational inputs more strategically and selectively, by challenging us to define our goals and devise appropriate assessments and by keeping us focused more critically on what is working and what isn't. In some instances this may mean spending less on schools than we thought we needed to. But in other instances, given the magnitude of the social and demographic changes taking place in the United States, it may mean spending significantly more than we have even begun to think of spending, and in significantly different ways.

So when the early advocates of OBE interpreted the "failure" of resource-based education to mean that we should focus now on results, they were on to an extremely valuable notion -- unless the shift in emphasis is taken to be a matter of either/or. And here is the other sense in which a "good idea" could go wrong, to use Manno's phrase. Just as his scenario alerts us to the dangers of embracing versions of OBE that may effectively remove the element of accountability from outcome-based reform, we should also be wary of versions of OBE that encourage elected officials and taxpayers to dismiss the issue of resources from the school reform agenda. OBE does not put resource-related questions to rest -- far from it, in fact -- and an OBE debate that in any way assumes it will may be

just as misleading, confusing, and unproductive in the long run as an OBE debate that focuses on the teaching of tolerance and self-esteem instead of English and mathematics.

EXPLANATION #4: OBE ISN'T REALLY ABOUT OUTCOMES AT ALL

The very heatedness of the OBE debate in so many states should also suggest to us one more possibility: that OBE, as provocative a concept as it is in its own right, has become **the vehicle of an even larger contest -- a contest for control over the "culture" of education.** In this scenario, OBE is such a galvanizing public policy issue not because so many people have made the objective determination that results-based education will be more successful than input-based education (or vice versa), but because so many people are frustrated, angry, and determined to challenge the educational powers-that-be and their assumptions about education. In this scenario, what's most significant is not which goals are proposed for inclusion in outcome-based reform, but who proposes them.

Manno hints at this when he casts "education bureaucrats" as the villains of the OBE drama. Self-serving (as he sees them), "politically correct," insulated from reality, prisoners of their own jargon, and seemingly unable to produce high-quality results, the professional educators and administrators who have been in charge of public education for generations should no longer (in his view) be trusted with the control of our schools. We can start by stripping them of the right to define educational outcomes, and by insisting on a list of rigorously academic goals by means of which schools can be held strictly accountable to elected officials and taxpayers. But as Manno makes clear by embedding this argument in a larger argument for public/private school choice and tuition vouchers, OBE is just one policy issue among several that provide opportunities to challenge the reigning educational culture.

In fact, as Nugent and Rigden's account of events in Pennsylvania suggests, outright opposition to OBE can also be a manifestation of this power struggle. The well-organized attacks on OBE from the religious right in that state were part of an ongoing nationwide effort by such groups, not confined to the OBE debate, to wrest control of schools from professional educators and restore it (as these groups would say) to families and communities. To the extent that outcome-based education initiatives are perceived as products of the existing school culture -- which has been predominantly liberal, secular, and humanist -- many religious and other conservatives can be expected to oppose them, almost irrespective of the specific outcomes in question.

So the OBE debate can be seen as giving shape to a deep and widespread public resistence to the educational status quo and frustration with its performance. If outcomes as such (and as distinguished from inputs) are important here, it is primarily because the focus on outcomes may be seen as promising parents and taxpayers more leverage over schools and educators than the focus on resources; outcomes are like products, and the "buyer" can choose whether or not to purchase a product, thus exercising what feels like a more direct form of control over the producer than if the buyer were trying to

regulate the producer's investment of resources. Viewed as part of this larger battle for control of schools, the OBE debate is only about outcomes in the sense that outcomes can be weapons (more or less effective, depending on how they're directed) in a power struggle, which is quite different from saying that the debate over OBE is a struggle about the content of educational goals.

CONCLUSION

Readers will undoubtedly find one or another of the above explanations more persuasive and helpful than the rest, but our hope is that taken together, these interpretations will help both to place OBE in the context of some important related issues and to put OBE in perspective. As Explanations 1 and 4 suggest, outcome-based education reform is inextricably tied to major questions about the nature of public compulsory education, questions that are arising in a variety of forms across the country. As Explanations 2 and 3 suggest, the fundamental principles and implications of outcome-based education can easily be obscured, intentionally or not, by interested parties and opinion leaders who view OBE through the lens of their own assumptions and concerns. In practice then, whatever its logical appeal, the OBE "movement" is not likely to proceed straightforwardly – or to provide a simple solution to what ails America's schools.

But that doesn't mean that business and education leaders, policymakers and community leaders can't sort through the complexities and advance those features of OBE that are most workable and most powerful as tools of reform. As Nugent and Rigden suggested in *Student Learning Outcomes*, the more we know about the pitfalls that await OBE initiatives, the better able we will be to anticipate and prepare for them and to stay the course in what promises to be a significant new effort to rethink teaching and learning in the United States.

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